

Luc Boltanski & Ève Chiapello, *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme*  
 Gallimard: Paris 1999, 195 Fr (hardback)  
 843 pp, 2 07 074995 9

SEBASTIAN BUDGEN

## A NEW 'SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM'

Politically, France is moving at the governmental level in much the same direction as the rest of Western Europe. Behind official rhetoric, the Jospin regime has accelerated privatizations (more public assets have been sold off than under the Juppé government), take-overs and cuts in social spending. The establishment press, after mourning the fall of 'modernizing' Finance Minister Strauss-Kahn on corruption charges, welcomes the reassurances of his successor Sautet that there will be no change of course. As in Britain, the Right is paralysed by rancorous internal disputes, and the official political scene devoid of any effective opposition. Intellectually, however, neo-liberal hegemony is weaker than elsewhere. Open advocacy of *la pensée unique*—the homologue of Anglo-Saxon TINA—has now become rarer. A generalized sense of discontent, of impatient and puzzled indignation, has found expression in a range of publications that have found a mass market. Publishers continue to find, rather to their surprise, that books denouncing the free market, globalization, labour flexibility, poverty and inequality are best-sellers. These are not mild sedatives of the sort produced in Britain or America by Will Hutton or Robert Reich. *La Misère du monde*, edited by Pierre Bourdieu, has sold 80,000 copies; *L'Horreur économique* by Viviane Forrester 300,000; *L'Imposture économique* by Emmanuel Todd, 50,000; *Ah! Dieu que la guerre économique est jolie* by P. Labarde and B. Maris, 70,000. Serge Halimi's merciless attack on sycophancy in the media, *Les Nouveaux*

*chiens de garde*, has been another spectacular success. However powerful conformist reflexes remain—with rare exceptions, reactions to NATO's blitz in the Balkans were no advertisement for Gallic intellectual independence—the moral climate has moved some way from the enthusiastic self-abasement and all-out Americanization of the eighties.

The appearance of *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme* by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello is the most important event of the turn so far. This massive book is an astonishing combination—an ideological and cultural analysis, a socio-historical narrative, an essay in political economy, and a bold piece of engaged advocacy. Like two experienced rally drivers, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello take the reader on a dizzying theoretical tour of the past thirty years, at each point where one fears that they might skid off the road with a gross generalization or incautious formulation deftly turning the wheel with an astute qualification or a whole new level of conceptualization. The work has been widely perceived as likely to become a classic.

Boltanski—of the same generation as Bourdieu, with whom he was once associated—is a sociologist who first came to public prominence with the work he co-authored with Laurent Thévenot, *De la justification*, a sophisticated and sometimes abstruse study of the different intuitive notions of justice people bring to their encounters with the world of social relations and objects. Associated, via Thévenot, with economists concerned with the conventions of market exchange—criticized by some for 'harmonicism'—Boltanski confesses a primary debt to Albert Hirschman, to whom *Le Nouvel esprit* is dedicated. Chiapello, by contrast, is a young instructor at a business school, whose first book was on the relationship between artists and managers. An established sociologist and a youthful management theorist do not make an obvious couple for a ferocious critique of contemporary capitalism. But this is, among other things, what *Le Nouvel esprit* delivers.

Its starting point is a powerful statement of indignation and puzzlement. How has a new and virulent form of capitalism—they label it a 'connexionist' or 'network' variant—with an even more disastrous impact on the fabric of a common life than its predecessors, managed to install itself so smoothly and inconspicuously in France, without attracting either due critical attention or any organized resistance from forces of opposition, vigorous a generation ago, now reduced to irrelevancy or cheerleading? The answer to this question, Boltanski and Chiapello suggest, lies in the fate that overtook the different strands of the mass revolt against the Gaullist regime in May–June 1968. There have always been, they argue, four possible sources of indignation at the reality of capitalism: (i) a demand for *liberation*; (ii) a rejection of *inauthenticity*; (iii) a refusal of *egoism*; (iv) a response to *suffering*. Of these, the first pair found classic expression in bohemian milieux of the late nineteenth century: they call it the 'artistic critique'.

The second pair were centrally articulated by the traditional labour movement, and represent the ‘social critique’.

These two forms of critique, Boltanski and Chiapello argue, have accompanied the history of capitalism from the start, linked both to the system and to each other in a range of ways, along a spectrum from intertwinement to antagonism. In France, 1968 and its aftermath saw a coalescence of the two critiques, as student uprisings in Paris triggered the largest general strike in world history. So strong was the challenge to the capitalist order, that at first it had to make substantial concessions to social demands, granting major improvements of pay and working conditions. Gradually, however, the social and the artistic rejections of capitalism started to come apart. The social critique became progressively weaker with the involution and decline of French communism, and the growing reluctance of French employers to yield any further ground without any return to order in the enterprises or any increase in dramatically falling levels of productivity. The artistic critique, on the other hand, carried by libertarian and ultra-left groups along with ‘self-management’ currents in the CFDT (the formerly Catholic trade-union confederation), flourished. The values of expressive creativity, fluid identity, autonomy and self-development were touted against the constraints of bureaucratic discipline, bourgeois hypocrisy and consumer conformity.

Capitalism, however, has always relied on critiques of the status quo to alert it to dangers in any untrammelled development of its current forms, and to discover the antidotes required to neutralize opposition to the system and increase the level of profitability within it. Ready to take advantage of even the most inhospitable conditions, firms began to reorganize the production process and wage contracts. Flexible labour systems, sub-contracting, team-working, multi-tasking and multi-skilling, ‘flat’ management—all the features of a so-called ‘lean capitalism’ or ‘post-Fordism’—were the result. For Boltanski and Chiapello, these molecular changes were not simply reactions to a crisis of authority within the enterprise, and of profitability within the economy, although they were that too. They were also responses to demands implicit in the artistic critique of the system, incorporating them in ways compatible with accumulation, and disarming a potentially subversive challenge that had touched even a younger generation of managers who had imbibed elements of the ‘spirit of 68’.

Capitalism is conceived here, in Weberian fashion, as a system driven by ‘the need for the unlimited accumulation of capital by formally peaceful means’, that is fundamentally absurd and amoral. Neither material incentives nor coercion are sufficient to activate the enormous number of people—most with very little chance of making a profit and with a very low level of responsibility—required to make the system work. What are needed are justifications that link personal gains from involvement to some notion of the common good. Conventional political beliefs—the material progress achieved under this order, its efficiency in meet-

ing human needs, the affinity between free markets and liberal democracy—are, according to Boltanski and Chiapello, too general and stable to motivate real adherence and engagement. What are needed instead are justifications that ring true on both the collective level—in accordance with some conception of justice or the common good—and the individual level. To be able truly to identify with the system, as managers—the primary target of these codes—have to do, two potentially contradictory longings have to be satisfied: a desire for *autonomy* (that is, exciting new prospects for self-realization and freedom) and for *security* (that is, durability and generational transmission of advantages gained).

The title of *Le Nouvel esprit* alludes, of course, to Weber's classic study of the Protestant ethic. Boltanski and Chiapello, however, argue that historically there have been three successive 'spirits of capitalism'. The first took shape in the nineteenth century. Its key figure was the Promethean bourgeois entrepreneur, a captain of industry with every capacity for risk, speculation and innovation—offset by determination to save, personal parsimony and austere attachment to the family. By the inter-war period, however, this model came to be felt as outmoded. Between 1930 and 1960, there emerged a new figure—the heroic director of the large, centralized, bureaucratic corporation. The dream of young planners became to change the world through long-term planning and rational organization, linking self-realization and security, as plotted by ascent through a fixed career structure, with the common interest of satisfying consumers and overcoming scarcity. In turn, the crisis of 1968 dealt a deathblow to this spirit of capitalism, discrediting its forms of justification as archaic and authoritarian fictions, with less and less bearing on reality (degrees no longer a guarantee of a stable career or pensionable future, etc.).

To mobilize sufficient human energies for it to survive and expand, the system now needed a third 'spirit'. This is the specific object of the enquiry Boltanski and Chiapello undertake, following the example of Sombart and Weber, through a comparative analysis of management texts from the 1960s and 1990s. These are prescriptive texts, that aim to inspire their target audience by demonstrating that the techniques they recommend are not only exciting and innovative, but also compatible—beyond mere profits—with the greater good. The contrast between the two periods is striking.

In the 1960s, management literature was constitutively troubled by the discontents of managers and the problems of running giant corporations. It offered to solve these by decentralization, meritocracy and limited autonomy for managers, without loss of overall control. Most feared was any survival of patriarchal or familial taints among employers (favouritism, nepotism, confusion of the personal and professional), that might compromise the rationality or objectivity of the management process as a whole. By contrast, the literature of the 1990s rejected anything that smacked of hierarchy or top-down control, as uneconomic in transaction costs and repugnant in moral overtones. The key tropes of such

texts now became the permanence of change and the ever-increasing intensity of international competition (the ‘threat’ of Asia or the Third World replacing the East–West conflict of the Cold War years), encapsulated together in the master-term of globalization. The central organizational figure of the contemporary world becomes the ‘network’. Indeed, so rhizomatic has management literature become that Boltanski and Chiapello almost suggest, in mischievous mood, that Deleuze and his followers could be taken for management gurus rather than anti-establishment philosophers. The flexible network is presented as a distinct form between market and hierarchy, whose happy outcomes include *leanness* of the enterprises, *team-work* and *customer satisfaction*, and the *vision* of *leaders* or *coordinators* (no longer managers) who *inspire* and *mobilize* their *operatives* (rather than workers). The ideal capitalist unit is portrayed as a self-organized team that has externalized its costs onto sub-contractors and deals more in knowledge and information than in manpower or technical experience.

Charisma, vision, gifts of communication, intuition, mobility and generalism become the ideal traits of the new leaders—dressed-down, cool capitalists like Bill Gates or ‘Ben and Jerry’ (particular targets of the anger of the Seattle protestors), who refuse to surround themselves with the formal trappings of bureaucratic authority. For in the ‘liberated enterprise’, control has become internalized in each employee, who ‘shares the dream’ of the leader, and externalized in the customer (‘the client is king’) and the pressures of competition. Taylorist separation of design and execution is overcome by integrated tasks of quality control and equipment maintenance, enhancing personal experience and autonomy. ‘Trust’ becomes the general lubricant of a world virtually without bosses, where everyone can realize themselves by involvement in the ongoing ‘project’, and has a chance of becoming a ‘visionary’ of their own dreams.

The downside of this utopian vision is partially conceded by neo-management writers, who note that the freedoms of this new organization of labour come at the expense of the sense of security offered by the more fixed career paths of the second spirit of capitalism. As partial recompense, they sketch a life-pattern of involvement in successive projects that continuously improve one’s ‘employability’ as a form of ‘personal capital’. The brittleness of the new spirit of capitalism shows through here, as it does too in the inordinate importance accorded by this literature to questions of reputation—integrity, sincerity, loyalty and so on: gestures towards personalization that only too clearly hint at the risk of their abuse through deception and opportunism.

Boltanski and Chiapello proceed to outline a model of the new moral framework of this emergent order, whose ideal figure is a nomadic ‘network-extender’, light and mobile, tolerant of difference and ambivalence, realistic about people’s desires, informal and friendly, with a less rigid relationship to property—for renting and not absolute ownership represents the future. By now it should be fairly clear how Boltanski and Chiapello connect the new spirit of capitalism with

the libertarian and romantic currents of the late 1960s. In however perverted a fashion, the challenge these threw down to *bourgeois society*, as traditionally conceived, have been rendered compatible with a new form of *capitalism*. In the process, the metaphor of the network, originally associated with crime and subversion, has been transformed into an icon of progress, upgraded by favourable discourses in philosophy and the social sciences (Kuhn, Deleuze, Braudel, Habermas, Anglo-Saxon pragmatism, symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, among others) as well as in new material technologies of communication and transport.

Such ideological and cultural analyses are then interwoven with analysis of socio-economic transformations and political processes, in a panoramic synthesis far beyond the scope of Weber's originating essay. In chapters devoted to the balance of forces in the enterprise, that have seen a steep decline in an already far from strong French trade unionism, Boltanski and Chiapello insist on the central importance of a reality that mainstream sociology, not to speak of political science, now effaces: social classes. But in accounting for the changes in these years, the weight of their explanation rests neither on conscious collective strategy nor impersonal structural pressures—although they do give consideration to both—but rather on the cumulative effects of many molecular actions leading to unintended or perverse consequences. Thus, the radical critiques of trade unionism and shop-floor representation from the far left after 1968 in the longer run furnished ammunition for an employers' offensive that weakened any chance of resisting the new ways of organizing the labour process; while after the oil shock, and recession of 1974–75, interaction between 'enlightened' employers and sociologists of work helped to neutralize any challenge to managerial prerogatives from below.

In the late 1970s, while the *nouveaux philosophes* were tirading against the evils of Communism, a silent counter-revolution was at work, slowly reversing the balance of power on the shopfloor. This was the decisive phase for morphological changes in the enterprise. But the Socialist victory of 1981 in turn accelerated the process, as the Auroux laws of 1982–83, supposedly strengthening the unions by shifting wage-bargaining to plant level, actually helped the employers to weaken them, while *énarque* economists enforced competitive deflation and former *soixante-huitards* became business consultants. As the social critique of capitalism was abandoned to a discredited PCF by the rest of the Left, former radicals pressed what remained of the 'artistic critique' into the service of various employers' initiatives—naturally, in the name of 'transcending capitalism', but also, thereby, anti-capitalism.

This ideology, however ascendant, could not occupy the whole space of representations in such a polarized society. As classes disappeared from any respectable discourse, the theme of social exclusion emerged as a relatively innocuous substitute. Boltanski and Chiapello trace the way humanitarian impulses in turn

gave rise to new social movements that embody a 'hesitant and modest' revival of the social critique of capitalism: rank-and-file *coordinations* that have mounted a number of strikes in recent years; movements of the *sans*—those 'without' the necessities of modern life, lacking documents, homes, jobs; or the autonomous SUD unions. All these, they argue, are faithful reflections of their time. Far from reproducing the traditional structures or practices of the labour movement, they display a 'morphological homology' with the network form of capitalism: flexibility and focus on specific projects, punctual agreements around particular actions, heterogeneity of composition, indifference to the numbers or forms of membership, and so on.

What, then, are the political conclusions of the book? For Boltanski and Chiapello, the discourse of 'exclusion' is much too weak to offer a sustained basis of resistance to the system. What is needed instead is a new conception of exploitation, adequate to the connexionist world, that links the mobility of one actor to the immobility of another, as a new form of the extortion of surplus value. The result is, in their view, a proliferation of relations of exploitation: 'financial markets *versus* countries; financial markets *versus* firms; multinationals *versus* countries; large order-givers *versus* small sub-contractors; world experts *versus* enterprises; enterprises *versus* temporary employees; consumers *versus* enterprises.' It is along these ramifying lines that the social critique of capitalism is to be renewed. Nor should the artistic critique be surrendered to its latter-day complicity with the established order. Rising rates of anomic suicide and depression are symptoms of the contradictions and limitations of capitalism's endogenization of its critical other. The notion of authenticity, too often decried as a value (by thinkers like Bourdieu, Derrida or Deleuze), can and should be rescued from its commodification by the market, without reverting to conservatism. The new spirit of capitalism demands a new critical combination against it, capable of uniting demands for solidarity and justice with those for liberty and authenticity.

What criticisms are to be made of a work ending on this note? The case for the 'new spirit' itself suffers from a certain under-motivation of its primary materials. The sample of management texts used is relatively small, and does not distinguish between local and translated works, or discuss relative sales or penetration. More importantly, no strong evidence is advanced for the general influence of this literature in French society at large. It is quite possible to believe that it has had a powerful impact on executives, without accepting that workers—even in the new 'lean' enterprises—really imbibe much of this ethos. It is also true that *Le Nouvel esprit* lacks any comparative dimension. Deregulation of finance, flexibilization of production, globalization of trade and investment are, after all, not confined to France.

Boltanski and Chiapello pay virtually no attention to Anglophone debates on these matters. Since major structural changes in contemporary capitalism

have been international in range, one must wonder whether they do not overestimate the weight of May 1968 and its aftermath in their causal account. The arrival of neo-liberalism in France was clearly over-determined in important ways by features of the local situation. But Boltanski and Chiapello can still be suspected of underplaying systemic pressures in favour of national and conjunctural variables. It would be interesting to know whether management texts since the mid-nineties (their sample is from 1989–94) continue to strike the same ‘critical’ note, or whether the pressures of global accumulation have led to more straightforwardly aggressive and war-like tropes.

Theoretically, Boltanski’s previous work with Thévenot was sometimes welcomed as a salutary rejection of the sterile rhetoric of ideological exposure and denunciation supposedly represented by Bourdieu’s school—a ‘pragmatic turn’, giving due weight to the beliefs and justifications of actors themselves, rather than consigning them to categories of false consciousness. Nourished by the best of communitarian philosophy—Walzer and Taylor—and by an ‘embedded’ microeconomics, this would be a new sociology capable of reconciling the interests of justice with the logic of the market. *Le Nouvel esprit* is clearly a more radical work than *De la justification*. But much of its theoretical apparatus remains continuous with the earlier book, without there ever being a satisfactory articulation between the two. What is common to them, however, is a conception of the state as a site of compromise—between different logics and norms—and thus of social constraint and regulation. It is this that allows Boltanski and Chiapello to focus so intensively on micro-displacements at the level of the enterprise, going behind the back of traditional corporatist arrangements or welfare institutions, and so to envisage a package of juridical reforms as the antidote to an unfettered development of network capitalism. The agents of such a programme, they suggest, might include high-level bureaucrats, executives and even enlightened capitalists. Here, clearly, is the limit of any such pragmatism, the point at which it deserts any sense of realism.